

CRISTIAN DUMITRESCU

Immigration: A Two-Way Street

Immigration is a phenomenon which is part of everyday life. More and more people are on the move because of armed conflicts, natural disasters, or economic woes. But immigration is not only a problem for displaced people; it is also a problem for the receiving countries, especially in the West, as they try to find resources and policies to provide for immigrants but also to limit their numbers. Christians are no strangers to this process, and find themselves on both sides of the divide. Most Christians in the West are torn between their Christian obligation to help those in need and their desire to keep immigration under control.

Politicians and people ask thorny questions. Should Western countries welcome or discourage immigrants? Are immigrants good for the local culture, or do they harm it? Are they a burden or a benefit for the economy? Should illegal immigrants receive amnesty and grace, or should they be punished? Finally, should the Western world continue to receive immigrants, or should the doors be closed?

Since its founding in 1776, the United States has been a nation of immigrants; the image of America welcoming the huddled masses to its shores is an integral part of how Americans view themselves and their country. In someone's words, "We Americans used to be proud of opening our doors to immigrants seeking freedom and opportunity. When did that change?" Europe, the Old World, is the top immigration receiving continent and is afraid of being overcome by Asian and African immigrants, so extremists and nationalist parties gain audience and votes by playing to this fear.

What is the proper attitude when faced with these sensitive issues? What should be the Christian response to both immigrants and to governments seeking to restrict or limit the number of people crossing their borders? Is there any connection between the Church's mission and immigration? Why do so many immigrants display a religious fervor that is long forgotten in Western societies? What should be the immigrants' attitude

when faced with injustice and rejection? This article will look at biblical history in an attempt to find guidelines and lessons for dealing with the realities of immigration.

A Global Perspective

In *The Longing for Home*, Ellie Wiesel, reflecting on the twentieth century remarked that displacements took place “on the scale of continents” and that “never before have so many human beings fled from so many homes” (Wiesel 1996:17). The beginning of the 21st century only confirms this trend. Statistics list about 15 million people registered by humanitarian organizations as refugees, 27 million internally displaced persons, and about 215 million immigrants (International Organization for Migration 2010). Nobody knows how many more millions move from their countries without even being registered. Some immigrants look for better living and economic conditions; others flee ethnic or religious persecution, while others are moving between two cultures or countries on a regular basis. In a Gallup poll, 700 million said they would immigrate if given the chance, which represent about 15 percent of the world’s adult population (Gallup Poll 2010).

All these people have one thing in common: they have been uprooted, they are strangers in a new land, and they often face loneliness and despair. But among this same group one can find the most intense hope, as well as the resoluteness to face whatever difficulties may come as they begin a new life in their new location or country. These people are also open to change and very accepting of new perspectives. For some, maintaining their religious identity is the only anchor in their unknown and unpredictable new world. Others bring with them a lively faith. Globalization is a multi-faceted and challenging reality that the world and the Christian Church has not been well prepared to deal with. John Koenig concludes that “unless we live in isolated rural areas, encounters with strangers are likely to form a normal part of our everyday routine” (1985:125).

Unfortunately, there are also some who say that immigrants are just looking for a better life that is “worldly” and materialistic. Others opine that it is better for them to stay home because they are not fit for a first world society. Protectionist legislation is often enacted in order to keep immigrants from altering or even overcoming the local economy and culture. But how many realize the economic benefits brought by immigrants? How many see the great potential for mission, both among the new arrivals, but also by the immigrants among the host culture? Like most situations, immigrants offer both social challenges and potentials for service and mission.

God and Immigration

I believe that God is interested in immigrants. Even more, I believe he is behind immigration. The statement may sound strange when one thinks about wars, famines, or other natural or human calamities that force people to move. However, a careful look at the Scriptures shows strong support for the idea that, yes, God uses such events for good. Although often seen as a negative, immigration offers unprecedented chances for testing Christianity, as well as for evangelism and mission. Human migration has occurred during all times and ages, and religion seems to have always played a significant role.

When talking about immigrants, one should not forget that the topic involves more than numbers and figures. Immigrants are human beings. As fellow human beings, created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-28), we should treat them as we would like to be treated if found in the same situation (Matt 7:12). There is no justification for feelings of superiority. "These immigrants and refugees are people above all else, people caught up in the trials, tribulations, and joys of life" (Carroll 2008:86). Although they are without a home and endure hardships, immigrants are often in a closer relationship with their Maker than those who happen to be born in an affluent society.

Strangers and Pilgrims in the Old Testament

The Bible describes God's people as "strangers and wanderers on earth" (1 Pet 2:11). To be a "stranger" is a mark of Christian identity, the apostle Peter alluding to the situation of Abraham living in Hittite territory (Gen 23:4). Four Hebrew terms communicate the concept of "otherness," or being an "outsider," a "foreigner," an "alien" or a "stranger" (*ger*, *toshabh*, *nokri*, and *zar*) (Block 1979:4:561). The patriarchs were non-native residents of foreign countries (*ger*) because they did not own land. The Israelites are described by the same term, as well as the Levites who were denied land in Israel (Deut 18:6). A temporary resident was described by the terms *ger* and *toshabh*, to whom property was allowed for a short time only (Gen 23:4; see Rendtorff 2002:77-87). The terms *nokhri* and *zkr* were employed for those who lived in Israel but did not want to assimilate or seek residency. *Nokhri* has the strongest negative connotations indicating suspicion and hostility (Gittins 1989:129). *Ger* is the most common term used and entitles the bearer with privileges and responsibilities as well as protection and rights at the same time.

There are several biblical characters that experience migration. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Naomi, Ruth, David, Esther, Daniel, and the exiled Israelites were all temporary or permanent immigrants, "foreigners in a strange land." Not all were treated the same way in their host

country, but generally speaking the traditional hospitality of the Middle East was extended to them sooner or later. God encouraged these guests to settle for a period of time and seek the good of the country that hosted them. It was not unusual to see some of them promoted to prominent positions in the administration, such as Daniel and his friends, Nehemiah, Mordecai, or Ezra.

Abraham was called by God to go to an unknown destination, and to become a “blessing to all nations” (Gen 12:3). A wanderer himself, he was still connected to his Aramean people and to the seasonal shepherding cycle. Abraham is told that his descendants will inherit the land but it will happen only after a long period of oppression. Does that sound familiar to those who know what immigration means, and to those who struggle to make a future for their children? Like the prophets later on, Abraham was called from ordinary tasks to take up the challenge of God. George Webber points out that “whenever God calls, he has work for us to do which disrupts the familiar, traditional patterns of our lives. He gives us an inner freedom that makes us available to serve Him” (Webber 1979:15).

Abraham’s immigration had a clear purpose: to become a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:3). And that purpose was to be true for all other immigrants in the Bible, but also today. God’s people are his chosen ones for a purpose: to serve and bless others. Abraham welcomes three strangers exemplifying all the elaborate biblical legislation for the reception and protection of foreigners. The “foreigners” bless Abraham in exchange.

Jacob wrestled with a “stranger” at the ford of Jabbok, not knowing it was God (Gen 32:24-31). But there he receives his new name, Israel, and a new identity (v. 28). Sometimes welcoming God in the stranger requires struggle. The stranger summons us to change, to rethink our own identities, to reorder our cherished priorities. As Darrell Fasching insightfully writes,

When we wrestle with God we become strangers to ourselves and thus are able to identify with the experience of the stranger and welcome the stranger in our lives. . . . Through the story of Jacob’s encounter with the stranger we come to learn that wrestling with the one who is alien or different does not have to lead to the victory of the one over the other. It can lead instead to mutual respect. Not all matches are zero-sum games in which there can be only one winner. Jacob wins; he prevails, but the stranger is not defeated and blesses him before departing. (Fasching 1992:2)

Joseph is another immigrant, betrayed by his brothers and forced to leave his country. He is humiliated by being sold to people of the same

blood. As if that was not enough, Joseph ends up in prison for trying to live up to his conscience and for rejecting the lifestyle and culture of his new country. He would have been justified to complain to God about his fate, but chooses to remain faithful. His curse will soon become a blessing not only for him, but also for his family and for all nations around Egypt.

Years later, the Israelites would find themselves under a cruel and unmerciful political regime in Egypt. It was difficult for them to understand God's purpose and hand in that oppression. But God was there, and wanted them to be a testimony to all nations, and that testimony is powerful as Israel leaves Egypt unharmed, rich, and free. All those who have seen God's powerful hand at work join them in leaving Egypt. Even Moses, their leader, had to be trained by God in the desert, in exile, so he could identify with Israel as a "foreigner and pilgrim." God is clearly the leader of these immigrants.

Finally, when they enter Canaan, God reminds Israel that "the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev 25:23). They were both a chosen people and aliens, stewards of the land but living there by God's grace. Every year they had festivals that reminded them about their status. Every harvest they remembered the story of their oppression, of liberation, and of God's miraculous intervention. This was no mere sentiment, but was to be practically shown toward the Levite, the poor, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow.

As a newly established nation in the Middle East, Israel faced life in a nomadic environment. People would come and go, and some sought shelter in Israel's territory. God knew this would be a challenge so he provided Israel with laws and regulations regarding the stranger and the sojourner. He wanted to make sure that, as his representatives, the Hebrew people would not forget that hospitality is not to be extended only to one's own. The chosen nation had a mission among the foreign people surrounding Israel. In other words, Israel's immigration legislation also had a missionary aspect. To be human is to reflect God's graciousness towards those who are less favored. As Daniel Carroll says, "To be hospitable is to imitate God" (Carroll 2008:94).

It has become a challenge to preserve the spirit of hospitality in today's fiercely individualistic societies. Western countries talk about democracy and human rights, but these seem to be granted mostly to those who belong to those societies. The Old Testament reminder to Israel not to forget their immigrant origins seems to speak perfectly to today's situation, for people in most Western nations have a migratory origin.

Israel was supposed to care for foreigners who no longer had an extended family or clan to belong to. Since it was the extended family that provided identity to the individual, sojourners were nobody in a foreign

country. They had no land, and usually no right to acquire property. The Old Testament legal system offered those in Israel's territory identity and the chance to live a decent life. James Hoffmeier states that "the laws of Israel were to be applied equally to Israelite and alien alike. The implied reason is that they are considered 'the same before the Lord.' This is surprising when we recognize that God had a unique covenant relationship with Israel" (2009:76).

Foreigners had both privileges and responsibilities. They received protection like other disenfranchised groups such as widows, orphans, and the poor. The special tithe collected every three years for the Levite, the fatherless, and the widow was designed to cover foreigners as well, "so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied" (Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-13). Foreigners were entitled to benefit from the same Sabbath rest as were the Jews (Exod 20:10). Israelites were not allowed to take advantage of foreigners or to treat them unjustly (Deut 1:16-17). Prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zachariah, and Malachi rebuked Israel for disregarding the divine instruction toward foreigners.

Non-Israelites were not only protected by law in Israel, but they were given the chance to integrate. Provisions were made for foreigners to embrace Israel's faith if they so desired. They had to be present when the law was publically read, and were also permitted to attend the religious festivals (Deut 31:10-13). Carroll notices that one had to understand and speak Hebrew in order to make sense of the law and ceremonies attended (2008:106).

The saga of Ruth illustrates the blessing brought by the divine instruction regarding the foreigner. As a Moabite, a widow, and hungry, with no possessions or family, Ruth migrates to Israel's territory at the time of harvest (Ruth 1:22). A faithful Israelite let her glean in the fields and makes sure she has everything she needs. But God has a greater blessing in store for her. From an immigrant she becomes part of the genealogy of Jesus (4:18-22). God transforms defeat into victory and mourning into joy by the hand of an Israelite who has not forgotten that he is a stranger and a sojourner, too.

The story of Naaman and the little servant in his house is a bit different (2 Kgs 5). Here we have a man, who has to "immigrate" for health reasons. On the other hand, another forced immigration brings an Israelite girl to his house. Although a prisoner, she is willing to tell him the secret for complete healing, illustrating how people often meet at the crossroads of two-way immigration. Naaman feels the touch of God not only on his skin but also in his soul.

Confronted with the exile, Israel cannot understand that God is behind it. The psalmist describes the situation in vivid terms: "By the rivers of

Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, and those who plundered us requested mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:1-4). They could not understand that they were not victims, but immigrants with a purpose, given a second chance for mission. "God was not only in the Temple or Sanctuary, but he was God of all earth and creation. They discovered they could sing God's praises in a strange land. He was there, as fully as in Jerusalem" (Webber 1979:12).

The Bible declares the exile as God's doing. God creates crises, allows them to happen. In Isaiah's words, "the Lord Yahweh Sabbaoth is about to deprive Jerusalem and Judah of resources and provisions, all reserves of food, all reserves of water" (Isa 3:1). The stories of Joseph, Ruth, Naaman, and all others suddenly make sense. People had to immigrate for various apparent reasons, but God was behind the scene turning disaster into blessing.

Jeremiah's message to the exiled Jews reveals God's purpose of immigration:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those *I carried into exile* from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which *I have carried you into exile*. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer 29:4-7, emphasis mine)

Israel, the chosen people, with a destiny and clear vocation had a difficult time listening to such messages. However, the exile became as normative and important for God's people as the Exodus. Because exile is God's doing, life in a new country can have meaning, purpose, and joy. There can be freedom in bondage.

In exile God's people were also given a clear vocation: "to seek the welfare of the city," not to give in to apathy, discouragement, or self-judgment. "Pray to the Lord on its behalf." Our loyalty is transcendent, beyond the claims of the immediate political situation. Integrity is the keyword, regardless of the place we are now in. In doing something for others around us, even as immigrants, we find the freedom that enriches our lives. We are called to think in new ways, and be flexible and open.

"We never grow old in our expectancy, in our openness to the future, in our freedom to follow the leading of God. In terms of our vocation we are a pilgrim people" (Webber 1979:16).

Esther is taken to King's Xerxes' palace and included in his harem. This would be shameful for an Israelite and for modern readers. But Mordecai's words reveal a deeper understanding: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). He recognized God's purpose and hand in history. Even Daniel recognizes that "the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand, with some of the articles of the house of God" (Dan 1:2). The later decrees issued by different kings under which Daniel served made God known in all provinces and languages in those vast empires, showing how God can turn forced immigration into a missionary end.

By God's grace Israel survived, and the reminder of their pilgrim and sojourner's status helped them not to forget that they were dependent on him. When Israel fell to idols and social oppression, forgetting that life and prosperity were received as gifts, God let them feel what exile really meant. They ended up orphans, widows, with no support, freedom, food, or hope (Lam 4-5). Jehovah became a foreigner (Hebr. *ger*) and a sojourner to them, "like a stranger in the land, like a traveler turning aside for the night" (Jer 14:8).

Strangers and Pilgrims in the New Testament

The New Testament does not annul the Old Testament instructions regarding sojourners and foreigners. God often comes to us in the guise of a stranger. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him" (John 1:10). Jesus was born as a stranger, exiled in a manger, far from his heavenly home. He was welcomed by three wise strangers from the East, and by the shepherds, the outcasts of society. Born as a Jew, he was rejected by his own people so all people could meet in him regardless of nationality. No one can boast of his true ethnicity.

Jesus himself had to experience what it meant to be a wanderer. He had to immigrate shortly after his birth. Although Matthew records the facts, there is no description of Jesus' family state as refugees. He identifies with all foreigners and sojourners. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt 25:35). He was also a pilgrim, on the dusty roads of Palestine, "as one who sought to meet the needs of others, always available to do the will of his father in heaven" (Webber 1979:16).

Jesus called his disciples to become strangers and pilgrims as well, to abandon their nets, a traditional occupation, in order to become fishers of men, an unknown job. He took them throughout Palestine, and also to the

land of Syria to force a confrontation with a culture they despised.

Jesus is the model for welcoming outcasts, strangers, and immigrants. He disregarded the Pharisees' laws about ritual purity and talked to a Samaritan woman who brings an entire village to accept him (John 4). On another occasion Jesus ends up being embraced by a Samaritan leper that was just healed (Luke 17:11-13). He also used a Samaritan as the model of a good and loving neighbor, a stranger caring for another stranger.

He often associated with the outcasts of society: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Matt 9:11). When approached by the centurion whose servant he would later heal, Jesus exclaims: "Many will come from East and West [sojourners, immigrants] and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11).

Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the only question they asked him was, "Are you the only *stranger* in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" (Luke 24:18). Unintentionally, they recognized Jesus' status on this planet.

The disciples hoped Jesus would liberate them from the Romans, the hated foreigners, but He never even alluded to it. He had a different plan. He needed the Roman infrastructure of roads and communication that would help carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, to all nations, tribes, languages, and peoples (Matt 28:18-20). Although not condoning the oppression, Jesus implicitly recognized the contribution these foreigners brought to the spread of the gospel.

Although in the New Testament Jesus does not give specific additional instructions regarding the attitude toward foreigners, he upholds the divine injunctions of the Old Testament by fulfilling them. He sanctions the continuity between the Testaments and the validity of the principles behind the Old Testament laws regarding foreigners and immigrants. "Jesus' actions and attitudes transcend cultural identity; they also help define what it means to be his follower" (Carroll 2008:125).

In the Palestine of New Testament times, immigration was a two-way street. The first migration movement is a centripetal one. The Romans stationed in Palestine heard the gospel, and centurion Cornelius is the first to knock at the Church's door. Peter is confronted in his siesta dream with the gentile stranger in the form of unclean food. He is advised to make no difference between people; he is told to abandon his prejudices against foreigners and welcome Cornelius to God's family.

The virtue of hospitality did not cease with the Old Testament. Christian believers are urged to continue to offer hospitality to strangers. The author of the letter to Hebrews reminds his readers that angels take the form of immigrants and strangers: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without know-

ing it" (Heb 13:2). Hospitality is also required of Christian leaders (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8).

The other migration movement took Jews towards the margins of the empire in a centrifugal way. Saul left Jerusalem wanting to clean the earth of the Christian "disease." He left with a plan, but reached Damascus with a totally different attitude. Here he was to receive the blueprint for the rest of his life. He became the best missionary to the Gentiles, while God's instruments in the Diaspora were the Jewish immigrants who had to flee Palestine because of persecution or economic crises. God does use immigration as a two-way street, bringing blessings on both the guest and the host.

Conclusion

The world's population is immigrating like never before. Wars, natural calamities, persecution, or economic reasons lead people to leave their homes. But God's plan is unchanged. Like Israel centuries ago, displaced Christians around the world must use the opportunity of being scattered in this world to reveal God's glory among the nations. Pol Pot's dictatorship in Cambodia made hundreds of thousands flee to Thailand refugee camps. There, Christians helped them and their example attracted and convinced Cambodians. Upon return, the new Cambodian Christians witnessed to their faith and today Christianity grows much faster in the country than before the war.

In addition, since hospitality is part of Christian identity, it would be a blessing if Western nations, confronted with the reality of immigration, would remember their historical Christian roots. Biblical history demonstrates that, if wisely approached, immigration can also be beneficial to the host countries. Most Western countries would benefit from the birth rates of the newcomers, as well as from their willingness to work hard in order to create a better future for their families.

Immigration is a reality. The outcome of this reality depends on the willingness to follow the lessons learned from biblical history. God is behind immigration, and he is ready to turn it into a blessing.

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